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**Notable Vincentians (2):
Brother Martin Blanka**

Translated and Edited by
John E. Rybolt, C.M.

*A manuscript life of the first brother in the American mission,
published here for the first time.*

[There are two sketches for the life of Brother Blanka, one brief and the other, presented here, more lengthy. The source for both notices is a manuscript volume intended for eventual publication in the *Notices sur les prêtres, clercs et frères défunts de la Congrégation de la Mission*, or *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*. Because of the large number sent to Paris from various provinces, only a small selection could ever be published. The authors of both sketches are unknown, but seem to have been aware of the events of Brother Martin's life from first-hand information. The French originals are found in "Notices VII 1848-1866", Archives of Saint Lazare, Paris, pp. 244-249.]

Early Life and Vocation

A life of 78 years consecrated in the most humble labors of the Congregation and spent entirely in the practice of the virtues of a true coadjutor brother of the Mission - such is the picture which Brother Blanka presents to us in his long career in a foreign land. His works, humble in themselves, have offered us the hope of a greater merit before God because he had to do them in circumstances demanding patience in the face of every trial, and with true apostolic zeal. He was a faithful companion of the first evangelical workers of our Congregation called to work in North America and walked generously in their footsteps. For 35 years he contributed by his work and especially by his prayers to the abundant fruits of salvation which soon appeared in that new land. God reserved for him the reward of seeing with his own eyes what the majority of the missionaries who had formed that first colony with him could not see - the multiplication of the works and the members of the Double Family of Saint Vincent in that country, still deserted when they arrived.

He was born in 1775 in Aussovie in the diocese of Olmuetz in

Moravia.¹ His family possessed enough funds to enable him to have an education full of faith and piety as he began secondary school. He knew Latin well, and one never knew the motives which kept him from aspiring to the ecclesiastical state. We may suppose that it was nothing else than humility because he did not lack the means, and also in his humble station he appeared happy in the many circumstances of his life.

At age 23 he resolved to leave the world to work for the acquisition of the kingdom of heaven but at that time, 1798, Europe was exploding. Seeing the flail of war ravage his country as it did others, he sought a calm port at the tomb of the apostles. His living faith made him aspire to the happiness of going to work in the service of God in the land consecrated by the blood of martyrs, and so he came to Rome. What did he find there? Desolation had passed over the holy city, too. The Vicar of Jesus Christ [Pope Pius VI] had been brought into exile and all religious communities had been suppressed. Providence led him to the house of Monte Citorio, where our Congregation had still been tolerated, and he asked to enter as a coadjutor brother. At that point the Church had begun to breathe more freely and since the power of the storm had passed over, the superiors agreed to admit him. After the time of ordinary trial, he was admitted to holy vows in 1803.²

Having reached the summit of his desires, he did not think about anything beyond producing fruits worthy of the gift of God received in exercising the practice of prayer, obedience and patience. His living faith made the accomplishment of all his duties easy. His tailoring also gave him time for quiet, which he used to give himself in a special way to union with God. In this way he was rewarded for fidelity to those first graces of God, among other precious ones which he received, by being able to participate at a distance in the works of an apostle and saint such as Father [Felix] De Andreis.

¹The name "Aussovie" appears to be an error for Ostrava, a city now located in Czechoslovakia.

²The dates of his birth, admission and vows differ, depending on the sources. The American vow book records his birth as 1777, entry as 17 May 1792, and vows 18 May 1794. The first manuscript sketch says he took vows 18 May 1801 in Rome. The General Curia's personnel records show him admitted 18 May 1803, with vows either 4 or 14 August 1805, in Fermo, Italy. Such variations are not unknown in early Community records.

Journey to America

This man of God came to know and appreciate Brother Blanka at the Collegio Alberoni at Piacenza, where they had been stationed together. In 1815, at the request of Bishop Dubourg, the bishop of New Orleans in the United States, Father [Domenico] Sicardi, then the vicar general of the Congregation, confided to Father De Andreis the choice of the personnel he wanted for his mission. He did not hesitate to select Brother Blanka, sure as he was of his virtue and devotion. The apostolic community went forth toward the end of 1815 and had at its head two men whose names will live for a long time. The first to lead us was Father DeAndreis, but he was soon taken from the young missions which he was going to form. The other was Father [Joseph] Rosati who later became bishop of Saint Louis and was for some years [1826-1827] administrator of the diocese of New Orleans. Father Rosati, and several companions had taken the sea trip [from Rome] to Marseilles, whereas Father De Andreis followed the land route and came to Piacenza where he enlisted Brother Blanka. He then began his long trip and crossed through many difficult places. The colony made gradual progress and had to stop three or four months in Bordeaux to wait for a boat [30 January - 12 June]. After a happy trip of 46 days, they arrived in Baltimore, 26 July 1816. Then they soon went to the Seminary of Saint Thomas, near Bardstown.³ There they had to wait through the whole winter until Bishop Dubourg arrived to lead the colony himself into his diocese.⁴

During the two-year trip, Brother Blanka did not cease being what he always was: united to God, mild, patient and ready for everything. At every instant he was occupied in alleviating the sufferings and privations of his companions. Also his virtue, depicted on his face and seen in all his actions, did not fail to catch the eye of the bishop of Baltimore, who was unable to hinder the happiness of the missionaries by taking from them

³In keeping with his duties, Brother Martin took charge of the extensive baggage of the missionaries, and made the journey on foot with the wagons from Baltimore to Pittsburgh.

⁴ December 1816-13 September 1818. DeAndreis and Blanka, together with Bishop Flaget and Rosati left a year earlier, 2 October 1817, to prepare for the arrival of DuBourg in Saint Louis.

such a pious, intelligent and devoted brother.⁵

Saint Louis and the Barrens

Once arrived at Saint Louis, Bishop Dubourg kept Father De Andreis with him. Brother Blanka remained in Saint Louis with Father DeAndreis for five or six months. Among other duties, he served as sacristan and was admired both for his piety and for the cleanliness with which he cared for the church.

Father Rosati, with several of his companions, had gone to begin a seminary at Saint Mary's of the Barrens, some twenty leagues from Saint Louis. It became the cradle of the Congregation in the United States. Saint Mary's of the Barrens was not then like it is today, a town of 8,000 [*sic* for 800?]. It was then completely deserted, and for their dwellings the missionaries first had miserable poorly-built cabins. The cold winter in the region made their life even more difficult, because of the pitiful condition in which they found their dwelling. It was common for them to wake up in the morning numb with cold and covered with snow. Added to that was the lack of furniture and the difficulty of procuring supplies. The nearest market was Sainte Genevieve eight leagues away, and lastly, the resources furnished by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith had not yet begun.

Father DeAndreis planned on placing Brother Blanka soon with the confreres at the Barrens, since he could not deprive them of the valuable help which he could afford them. He sent him to take part in the beginnings of that house. The care, the fearlessness and the patience of this good brother made him more necessary there than ever.⁶

Brother Blanka devoted his abilities to making some small fur-

⁵DeAndreis received a request from the Sulpician Archbishop Ambrose Maréchal of Baltimore to send confreres to his diocese. DeAndreis declined in a letter of 8 July 1817. Maréchal's predecessor, Leonard Neale, had died on 18 June. Maréchal, who must have encountered the band of missionaries when they stayed with his Sulpician confreres, made his appeal. The author of this notice perhaps had this incident in mind.

⁶DeAndreis remarks in a letter of 24 February 1818, that Brother Blanka hoped for some brother companions from Europe. Two brother candidates had arrived, brothers Harrington and Bettelani, by September of 1820. Brother Blanka's health and happiness suffered during his months in Saint Louis, where he remained until after the founding of the Novitiate in December 1818. "Brother Blanka is on top of everything, but his health has suffered a lot. He is thin and pale as a corpse, but he works with the strength of four men."

niture. Exercising all these trades at the same time, he took care of the missionaries and was their cook and tailor; at times he was also the carpenter and stonemason. In addition, he made long journeys on horseback to get supplies. Two years passed in this painful situation until the seminary was conveniently constructed and furnished. But Brother Blanka's activity always had plenty of outlets. He kept his eye on everything, worked to establish good order and to provide the material things necessary in a community house. His sense of order was the fruit of his placid spirit, always united to God in prayer. He received also from heaven the necessary lights to fulfill all his functions.

His Virtues

His love of the poor gave him satisfaction, since he had to live amid privations, and got by with only a little. Nevertheless, he knew how to handle poverty well and could always respond to the needs of the moment, either by meeting some demand in unforeseen circumstances, as often happens in a large house, or even to cheer up the young seminarians with small gifts. For example, he caused a box of sugared almonds, received as a present on his departure from Europe, to last for ten years. But if he practiced poverty so well, he did not fall into that defect for which poverty sometimes offers a pretext - a lack of cleanliness. Although his clothing was always old and worn, it was clean and simple. He thereby arrived at great mortification of soul in small things.

Pain did not frighten him either, and in everything that concerned him personally he acted unstintingly. The more he took care of others, the more he seemed to neglect his own needs. For example, people used to see him in the winter, hands often cracked by the cold and bleeding, remaining at his work without looking for relief. The mortification which he practiced to such a high degree made him also a most faithful observer of the rule of silence. His little workroom was like an oratory, one heard there only the sound of prayer. He was the only brother in the house, but he had been given some children as apprentices to form them in their state. He kept them also rigorously silent, reciting the rosary with them as they worked or having them take turns in

doing some pious reading. And so while forming their hands at work, he also formed their spirits to the prayerful science of a true Christian.⁷

All these means brought him, as we might believe, to a great union with God. One may easily understand how happy, affable and gentle he was because that same calmness which caused him to provide for all those in the house gave him the talent of controlling himself in his relationships with the neighbor. We can find in him the realization of these words of our Lord, *in patientia vestra possidebitis animas vestras*. ("By patient endurance you will save your lives." Luke 21:19) Faithful to all the points of the rule, he set a good example for the entire house, not only for the seminarians, but also for the priests. They could not refrain from admiring the lights which God gave this good brother during his prayers, as one could judge by the repetitions which he made when questioned.⁸ His examples and his prayers doubtless obtained many graces and abundant blessings for this young house, which was simultaneously a minor seminary, the novitiate of the Congregation, and a school of theology. Full of wise discretion, he knew how to speak to each one with the simplicity and prudence required by the quality of each one to whom he spoke.

Thus Father Rosati, the superior, placed his entire confidence in him in those things concerning the support of the inside of the house. He had a high esteem for Brother Blanka, but one circumstance in particular increased in a special way the knowledge which he had of the supernatural lights which God granted to this virtuous brother. It often happened that he could rely on his judgment in matters of material administration, but the circumstances of which we will speak showed him that he could also count on his advice in more important matters.

⁷There was another side to Blanka's life, passed over in silence by the author, or perhaps unknown to him. As early as 1820, he had angrily come to equate the work of brothers with that of slaves. DeAndreis records this in a report to Father Antonio Baccari, vicar general, 4 February 1820. Also, many years later, he, with Brothers Oliva and Vanucci expressed their wish to return to Italy, given the unaccustomed harshness of their new superior, John Baptist Tornatore. Oliva wrote of their mutual determination in a letter of 30 July 1832.

⁸The author refers to the practice, introduced by Saint Vincent and enshrined in the Common Rules, of sharing the fruits of one's mental prayer with the assembled confreres when asked to do so by the superior.

His Discretion

After Father Rosati was consecrated bishop of Saint Louis [1824], he still remained at the Barrens and continued as the superior of that house. He was disposed to ordain someone soon and had already selected several young students of the Congregation to be elevated to the priesthood. Among these latter was a young man who had not yet finished his novitiate. He was of an exemplary regularity and seemed penetrated with the spirit of his state. Bishop Rosati, counting on his piety, did not have any difficulty in calling him to receive sacred orders although he had not taken his holy vows. Some days before the ordination, the young man had occasion to ask Brother Blanka for certain repairs to his clothing. The good brother spoke little, and he used to keep himself from involvement in useless or curious conversations; but his spirit, enlightened from on high, sometimes knew how to penetrate hearts. Something must have struck him about the soul of this young man, whether in his manner or in his speech. His discretion and simplicity were soon put to the test.

His simplicity moved him to communicate his impression to the superior; but discretion kept him back, thinking that he should not get involved in a matter above his competence. Nevertheless, faithful to the spirit of Saint Vincent, he preferred filial simplicity and went to look for Bishop Rosati. He went to him with his accustomed modesty, and admitted that his first words embarrassed him, since he found himself having to make a communication which might seem indiscreet. The bishop encouraged him to speak with his ordinary goodness, and he asked what it was about. Brother Blanka said, "Bishop, I have learned that you are going to confer holy orders on Mr. N.; it seems to me that if you do so now to this young man, he will soon leave the Congregation." This language astonished Bishop Rosati and he could not believe in the loss of the vocation of a novice. He answered Brother Blanka severely and told him not to be occupied in the vocations of the young people. The day of ordination came and the young man in question received the priesthood. On the very next day he did not appear for prayer with his confreres. Bishop Rosati noticed his absence but he believed it to be an accident and he waited the second and third day, but the young priest

remained absent from prayer. Bishop Rosati called for him and expressed his astonishment at seeing such irregularity, after such a period spent in the practice of strict observance. The young man's answer soon showed the bishop the lack of sincerity in his conduct. He told him that he did not feel called to the Congregation, and he was to be placed in some parish. Bishop Rosati then recalled what Brother Blanka had said, and thereby came to an even greater esteem and veneration of him.⁹

Louisiana Mission and Last Days

In 1837, the Seminary of the Assumption was confided to our Congregation.¹⁰ Although advanced in age, Brother Blanka freely accepted the proposition made him to go and contribute to the new foundation. Despite his 64 years, he had kept his youthful vigor which supported his peace of soul and the happy customs of his regulated and holy life. For ten more years he continued to render great services, until at the end, conquered by age and infirmities, he was obliged to condemn himself to the rest which he had constantly refused when he was in good health. God had given him a precious time to prepare himself for his last two years in holy exercises of prayer and pious reading. He always maintained his same affability and gentleness towards the neighbor. Far from complaining, he was grateful for the least services rendered him, and he waited in humble patience for the hour when it would please our Lord to call him to himself and give him his reward.

Toward the beginning of 1853, a partial paralysis attacked him. Without being deceived about his state of health, he judged that his end was approaching and he did not want to defer receiving

⁹The author is doubtless referring to John Boullier. He entered the novitiate 7 December 1825, and was ordained to the priesthood at the Barrens, 11 March 1826. In the normal course of things he should have taken vows 8 December 1827, but they were delayed more than two years, to 25 February 1830, perhaps to give him time to decide about remaining in the Community. His later life, however, seems to have been exemplary. He died a Vincentian in his native France, 28 May 1853, where he had gone to try to regain his health.

¹⁰The Seminary of Saint Vincent de Paul, to give it its proper title, was located on Bayou Lafourche, now in the town of Plattenville, Louisiana. The confreres conducted the local parish church of the Assumption as well as other missions, together with the seminary. It remained there until it accidentally burned on 27 February 1855. The seminarians then transferred to a new seminary at Saint Stephen's parish in New Orleans. The author also fails to mention the gradual loss of sight which Brother Martin underwent; several letters written from America attest to it.

the last sacraments. He feared losing his senses and not maintaining consciousness to receive piously the last help of religion, and so he asked that they be administered without delay, although his confreres pressed him to wait a little. On 18 February he felt weaker and did not doubt that his last day had arrived. This good brother, who during his life had been so thoughtful about everything for the care of others, had thus seen his last hour in advance. He asked his superior [Anthony Andrieu] therefore to have lighted in his room the candle which forty years before he had had the sovereign pontiff Pius VII bless, and which he had brought from Rome to America just for his last moment. His wish was satisfied, the candle was lit, and it well symbolized the faithfulness of this servant of God who had kept to the end the flame of charity burning in his heart.

At this moment God gave him the consolation of receiving a visit from Bishop Blanc, the archbishop of New Orleans.¹¹ This prelate had arrived that very evening at the seminary to celebrate an ordination there. As a young priest he had known Brother Blanka, and was filled with veneration for his friend and so hastened to come and visit him when informed of his condition. The good brother was overwhelmed with gratitude for such a great favor. He asked for the bishop's blessing and he entered with a living faith into all the pious sentiments that the bishop suggested to him. Then feeling that his last hour had arrived, he said to him, "Now, bishop, I must leave," and from that moment he was occupied with God. He did not cease saying several prayers until his breathing grew weaker and he could not make himself understood. But the movement of his lips continued to reveal the sentiments of his heart. After a sweet and peaceful agony, he rendered his soul to the Lord, leaving the entire house filled with edification at the life of such a holy old man, who had spent so many years in the exercise of charity. He went to receive from his divine master the great reward promised to one who has remained faithful in many things.

Thus lived the first of the coadjutor brothers of our province of

¹¹Antoine Blanc, 1792-1860, had several connections with the Community. He had done his seminary training in Lyons, was ordained there by Bishop Dubourg in 1816, and then worked as a priest along with many confreres in the Mississippi Valley. He succeeded Leo DeNeckere, C.M. as bishop of New Orleans in 1835 and Rosati ordained him a bishop. He became the first archbishop of New Orleans in 1850. It was he who gave the Assumption Seminary to the Community.

the United States. May his example serve as a model for those who survive him and whom Providence has destined to have a similar career. One day God will without doubt let the

world know how many souls have been saved by the merits and prayers of this good brother, so sanctified by obedience and union with God.¹²



*Blessed be God, Ladies, who has given you the grace to cloth
Our Lord in His poor members.
Saint Vincent de Paul*

*I very humbly thank you for all the care and charity you
manifest in my regard, and for the excellent bread, preserves and
apples which I have just heard you sent me. (Vincent to Saint
Louise)
Saint Vincent de Paul*

*The lay-brothers sometimes give a better account of their prayer
and have more beautiful conceptions than the priests. Why so?
Because God promised it, and because He is pleased to hold con-
verse with the lowly.
Saint Vincent de Paul*

¹²The first notice ends with this observation: "He always remained faithful to his post, despite so many difficult circumstances. A missionary who had known him for a long time, now returned to Europe, still cannot speak of him except in the most admiring way."